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By Rep. Vern Buchanan (R-Fla.) □

This week, for the first time in 16 years, the U.S. House of Representatives will vote on a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. This represents a historic opportunity to put an end to Washington's out-of-control spending spree and helps ensure the long-term financial security of our children and grandchildren.

While it is unfortunate we have reached this point, the evidence is clear that the only way to stop Congress and the President from spending money we don't have is through a constitutional mandate.

The federal government borrows \$188 million every hour of every day of the year. It is more obvious than ever that Washington has proven incapable of making the tough choices necessary to rein in spending and reduce the federal deficit.

Unbelievably, in the last 50 years, the federal budget has only been balanced five times. 49 out of 50 states, including Florida, have balanced budget requirements. Why should Washington be any different?

The very first measure I introduced in Congress was a Constitutional Amendment requiring a balanced budget. It simply requires the federal government to live within its means.

For too long, Republicans and Democrats have turned a blind eye to our government's budgetary mess.

The 111th Congress added more to the national debt than the first 100 Congresses combined.

As a whole, the current share of the \$14 trillion debt is \$45,800 for every man, woman, and child in the U.S. This reckless pattern of borrowing and spending has put our country on a road to bankruptcy.

Now, more than ever, Washington needs to make the tough choices necessary to balance the budget for taxpayers today and for future generations.

The enormity of our fiscal challenge may have been best expressed by Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who warned "the biggest threat we have to our national security is our debt." In more apocalyptic terms, Erskine Bowles, co-chair of the president's debt commission, said "the debt is like a cancer... it is going to destroy the country from within."

The time is right for Congress to ratify a balanced budget amendment and send it to the states.

Buchanan represents Florida's 13th district and serves on the House Ways and Means Committee.